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AUTHOR Shepherd, David I.
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ABSTRACT

Students should be taught a variety of study skills, so that these skills will develop into habits that free them to think about the information presented in their textbooks. Although the study skills are common to all content areas, their application varies with each specific subject. Perhaps the foremost skill is attacking the assignment, which may be accomplished through the SQ3R formula (survey, question, read, recite, review), a method in which teachers should provide guidance. Next, students need to see the organization of the information. They should be taught about the organization of books, chapters, and chapter sections and about the structure of paragraphs. They also need to be taught and given practice in ways of summarizing and taking notes, and they may need to be taught how to record answers to questions. If students are working on independent assignments, they need specific instruction in locating and synthesizing information, including delineating the problem, noting entry terms to use in locating information, using library skills, reading to get information, and writing and giving the report. Other study skills that are needed are the ability to use graphic aids and to read directions. All these skills must be implemented and practiced in each of the content disciplines. (GT)

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IMPROVING CONTENT AREA PERFORMANCE THROUGH IMPROVING STUDENT STUDY SKILLS

David L. Shepherd

To paraphrase an old-fashioned colloquialism, the study-skills are the work horses of the reading process. They are the skills used by the efficient reader and the competent student who employs them without being aware they are so doing. The study skills should become so ingrained within the student that they become his habits of study. The purpose of such efficient methods of study is to free the student's mind to think about the information presented by the author. The competent student, then, does not ponder about how to study but rather on the ideas in the reading assignment.

The study skills include a wide scope of skills and different labels are attached to them as well as the inclusion or exclusion of specific skills. As a group, they are not discretely defined. Among the many different labels that are applied to them are locational skills, reference skills, research skills, comprehension and interpretation skills, skills of adjusting the techniques of reading to the nature of the material, the setting of purposes for reading, skills of attacking an assignment and seeing the organization of information as well as skills in using graphic aids.

A direct application of study skills can, and should, be made to each of the content areas. The student will find that the study skills are common to all content areas but also that their application will vary with each specific subject. Each subject has its own style(s) of writing, varies in the compactness of writing, and has its own vocabulary. Therefore, a student cannot readily transfer the study skills that he learns in English to mathematics; certainly not without creative adaptation which he usually is not able to do. Instruction is essential by the teacher of each subject in the application of the skills to the subjects as the student needs to use the skills in his study.

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What, then, are these skills common to all academic subjects in which the student should have competences if he is to succeed? Perhaps, foremost, are techniques of attacking an assignment. Next is the knowledge of how to see the organization of the information. This involves various levels: the organization of a book, a chapter, sections within a chapter and the organization of paragraphs. Another skill involves the act of summarizing information and how to take notes. It may also involve the formulation of answers to questions. Then, if the student is expected to do research for data outside of his textbook, he needs all of the skills required in locating information as well as synthesizing the information into a report. Further, there are the skills of using the graphic aids which supplement the running text. The aids: pictures, maps, diagrams, charts, tables, cartoons, time-lines and overlays are oddly seldom used by many high school students - by their own admission. Perhaps, they do not know how. And finally, the student needs to know how to read directions. As one ponders these skills, he/she will see too that they are interrelated. They are not completely discrete unto themselves.

Attacking the Assignment

As one works with students, it becomes readily apparent that a majority do not have efficient methods of doing an assignment. They seem to read it, it seems, to soak up the information as a sponge soaks up water. The fault here is that they are not as efficient in soaking up the information as a sponge can water.

The time-honored procedure for attacking an assignment was first suggested by Francis Robinson with his SQ3R formula (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review). Though there are variations to this formula, the essential steps remain the same. In it, the students read the material three times. The first is a survey: to get the scope of the information, to see the large segments of

organization and how they may be interrelated to discover the new terms. This is a preparatory step in which the student notes highlights of the information and gets his mind-set to the nature of the material. Then, he reads in detail for a specific purpose (Question) to guide his reading. Finally, after he has thought about the information (Recite); he reviews, reading only in detail again those parts which still elude him. This is similar to the type of reading he does for the survey.

Yet, many students resist this formula. It takes too much time! Reading the information three times! In the view of many students such a procedure is indeed too time-consuming. Therefore, the student must be guided to see the efficiency of the method. The teacher should with each assignment guide the student in the steps indentifying to the student what the steps are. The teacher should also show the student the parallel of the study formula to a standard content reading lesson. As he/she goes through each step of a lesson, the student should be informed of the steps. The student should be guided to the insight that there is a method, a science if you will, to teaching procedure. This guidance must be constant so that the student develops the habit of effective study.

Seeing the Organization of the Material

To see the organization of information the student must realize the interrelationship of the areas of information and note its logical development as presented by the author. As soon as textbooks are issued instruction should begin in this skill. An analysis of the Table of Contents should be made to note the order and sequence of the units and chapters and begin immediately to see their interrelationship. The student must be taught to see organization as proceeding thusly: Title, Unit, Chapter, Chapter Sections, Topical Headings, Paragraphs.

Throughout the year such organization must be pointed out and used. With each reading assignment the function of topical headings and paragraphs should be noted. Students need to be guided how to formulate questions from topical headings and to know that the answer to such questions will be found in the ensuing material. (I have found college students who were unable, at first, to formulate questions from topical headings.)

Then, the student needs to be taught about the structure of pararaphs. He/she needs to see the predominant patterns. The most predominant one is the central thought followed by details. Other patterns he/she may encounter maybe paragraphs of definition, of illustration, step of a process, chronology, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, problem solving, and in literature, narration and description. To teach these patterns, the teacher will need to 1) analyze paragraphs sentence by sentence noting the interrelationships of the sentences and 2) to alert and acquaint the student with signal words which give clues to organization and/or points of emphasis, (i.e., first, second, next, finally, but, most important, etc.).

All content teachers other than English may well think this is not their responsibility. However, it is indeed! The content teachers must realize that as they do this in science, mathematics, etc., they are also teaching the subject matter. When a student reads, he/she is reading for information. What the content teachers are doing, then, is teaching the student the process of how to get information by using the course content they wish the student to acquire. It is a change of focus from just mere coverage of content to how to acquire the content with the content being acquired as the student learns the techniques.

Obviously the skills included here use also those of attacking an assignment as well as seeing the organization of information. But, also, the student

may need to realize what a summary is - that it is in the main the compilation of the central ideas in the foregoing material. He/she needs also to be taught and given practice in various ways of summarizing and in taking notes. Depending upon the nature of the material, notes can be organized in various ways. Of these varying methods, the outline is considered to be applicable to all material and, indeed, to be able to outline means that the student does see the organization of the material. But both notes as well as summaries can take other forms. These maybe paragraphs, comparative or cause and effect columns, charts, diagrams, a listing, the steps of a process, a time-line or a flow nature of the information and the other is the efficient use of the notes (summaries) by the student.

One further point related to note taking and summarizing involves the answering of questions. A number of teachers have discerned that students do not always know the form an answer should be in when answering a question. They have found that upon oral questioning the students are able to give forth with a proper answer. However, they seem to be unable to formulate it in writing. What the teachers found upon investigation is that many students are not sure how to implement in their answers such words and terms as, give a definition, trace the development, enumerate, sequentially, compare, show, give your opinion about, and support it, etc. The teachers found that they needed to review for a time the assignment questions and determine with the students how the answers were to be recorded.

Locating and Synthesizing Information

This includes a cluster of skills, where the students are doing an assignment independently. But, many do not know what is involved and it seems in many instances that little instruction is given. This area also uses all of the other skill areas noted, in fact, it is a type of culmination in bringing them all into use. It is excellent as a means of reinforcement

but the students must be guided in the order of procedure.

What skills might the teacher need to include to give the students an adequate competence in locating and synthesizing information? Essentially, they include:

1. Delineating the problem. The student needs to think about the problem to determine its scope and the tentative order of subtopics to be included.
2. Noting entry words/terms to use in locating information. For instance, what term(s) should be used to find information in a card catalog and in an index?
3. Knowing library skills. The students may need specific guidance in ways of using the card catalog and various references in the library. This will include also sources for information which might differ somewhat from subject to subject. The content teacher is the best person to help the students with sources of information in endemic to his/her discipline.
4. Reading to get the information. Here, we see specifically the competence the students must have in attacking an assignment, in seeing the organization of information and in taking notes.
5. Writing the report. Now the students must have techniques of synthesizing their information, especially if they have used more than one source. They have to go back to their tentative outline, firm it and then begin to write. At this time all of the instruction they have received in paragraph patterns will be used as they construct their own.
6. Giving the report. If the report is to be given orally to the class, the students must have instruction in how to do so effectively.

Again, the organization of information in the report is of a high priority so that the students listening can see the logical order of the information.

Indeed, students need specific instruction in these steps. A valid procedure might be for the class to do a class project in the beginning along with their individual ones. In this way there would be instruction in the necessary skills with immediate application to their own projects for each step. Such would be the effective procedure of instruction followed by application (reenforcement).

Using Graphic Aids

Students have said that they like a lot of graphic aids in their textbooks because then there is less to read! However, by their own admission they do not use them. Why? May one reason be that the graphic aids, as obvious as they maybe to those of us who teach, are aids that they do not know how to use?

It maybe that the students do now know what to look for. As in reading words there needs to be a purpose, thus it is with the various graphic aids. If one is looking at a map, picture, chart or any other graphic aid, one may not see anything significant. However, if one is looking for something, then that guides the viewing of the aid to obtain the information. Of course, there are keys and legends the student must be able to use with the graphic aid. These can be taught easily by incorporating the skills into regular lesson procedures as the students are guided to preview and then to analyze the information.

Following Directions

Reading directions may require an application of procedure with which the students are either unfamiliar or have not made habitual. For one thing,

following directions requires a meteculious reading which many students have not been trained to do. Contrary to most reading, the reading of directions may require word-by-word reading. Further the student may not know the proper procedure of reading the directions through to get an overview, then to collect materials required of such are needed, and then to go step by step as the directions are followed. Also, the students use of the vocabulary used may not be precise enough. For instance what are they to do actually when they are directed to "place ____," "set ____," "locate____," "through the center to show its axis ____," etc? Note that these are very simple English words which nearly all high school students can "read" (call) but their understanding of the specific meaning required may be vague.

As the students need to use the various study skills, teaching procedure must insure that they are given whatever instruction is needed. These skills are vital for effective study. They must be implemented and practiced in each of the content disciplines as aids to gaining information. These are process skills. The content teacher must teach process as the means of teaching content. Content and process must be fused.